

Resurrection, Not Restoration

An Easter Eve Service of Light • April 11, 2020
Trinity Church in the City of Boston via Livestream
Rev. Patrick C. Ward
The Exsultet & Isaiah 4:2, 5-6

*“All you who stand near this marvelous and holy flame,
pray with me to God the Almighty
for the grace to sing the worthy praise of this great light.”ⁱ*

In the name of God.

AMEN.

You know, as traditional as we can be at Trinity Church, in the last 20 years we have never developed a habit or a customary place for the kindling of our new fire at Easter, or for the lighting of our paschal candle.

For some years we lit the fire on the broad step, in the spot where we place our baptismal font. It would burn through the first part of the evening, ebbing as the vigil readings progressed. “Like hearing stories around a campfire,” someone once observed.

And then for a number of years, we lit the fire up above in the West Gallery. We’d ask the congregation to stand and turn to face the organ pipes as the service began in pitch darkness. Some, especially newcomers, found that sudden flash or fire shocking or even terrifying, responses which I do not think are out of bounds at the beginning of an Easter Vigil.

And then in recent years, wind and weather cooperating, we have moved the kindling outside, onto the West Porch. This is the most traditional spot on which a church can build a fire. In 2014, when Holy Week coincided with the one year anniversary of the Boston Marathon Bombing, we invited other clergy from the neighborhood, our friends from Temple Israel and from Boston’s Muslim community, to witness the lighting with us, and to carry flames back to their own communities in tiny lanterns.

“Oh God, you led your ancient people by a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night.”ⁱⁱ
So recalls an old prayer we have borrowed from the traditional Vigil service this evening. So the fire of the ancient Israelites moved *too*. And tonight, as millions of Christians around the world are waiting for the Easter good news not together in churches but at home, with loved ones or alone, our fire has moved again.

Henry Diver, one of our choristers, had been preparing to be baptized tonight. And Henry and others will be baptized before too long, on or soon after that happy day when we meet again. For tonight though, in this season of pandemic and physical distancing, our fire has been kindled in Henry’s family’s fireplace. From it, Henry has lit the lamp that is our paschal candle, and on

Friday evenings to come, however many it takes, a new lamp will be lit in another parish home, and from the last lamp our altar candles will at last be kindled on that Sunday when we are together again.

“Oh God, you led your ancient people by a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night.”

So we’ve been “pilgrims in place” during these last few weeks of Lent. And tonight, on the very brink of proclaiming the resurrection, it’s a good time to recall that we all headed somewhere together, and not simply back some day to Copley Square. We are headed, together, into resurrected life.

That is the message of Easter, of the *tomb* which in the morning we will find empty. “Indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee.”ⁱⁱⁱ That’s what the angel will; tell the first disciples to arrive. This resurrected Christ, like a pillar of cloud, like a pillar of fire, moving. Refusing to stand still. “Indeed, he is going ahead of you to Galilee.”

You know, this year, this Corona Virus Year, I am hearing these words as I’ve never heard them before. I’m understanding, at last, why the angel’s words when I hear them never fail to bring a lump to my throat and tears to my eyes. “He is going ahead of you,” the angel says. In other words, he desires a future with us. His forgiveness will open that future, and life as we have come to know it will be made new. *A pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night.*

For the ancient Israelites, life would never be the same again. For Peter and James and John and the others, life would never be the same again. Consider Peter as we come to know him after the Resurrection, in the Book of Acts. He will become a person of astounding eloquence and bravery.^{iv} And there, tonight, is probably the most important Easter truth in this Corona Virus Year. Resurrection is *not* restoration.

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What we have lived through together in these weeks, what we *will* live through together in these weeks to come, will change us, will stay with us. Or it should. The resurrected Christ, even as he will lead the disciples out from the claustrophobia and confinement of the upper room^v, even as will invite them to breakfast on the beach,^{vi} carries the wounds.

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You know, after the great influenza pandemic of 1918, Americans **did** go back to church. And back into cinemas and restaurants and concert halls and stadiums. The late scholar and academic Alfred W. Crosby, writing of *that* epidemic in 1998, noted that as soon as the virus ebbed, as viruses do, and the dying stopped, the forgetting began. The disease called the Spanish Flu had claimed more than half a million Americans in less than 10 months. That’s more than the total number of American who would die in combat in the 20th century. “It’s not in our collective memory,” Crosby told an interviewer after publishing his book, *America’s Forgotten Pandemic*.

“It’s not in our collective memory. That to me is the greatest mystery, how we could have forgotten anything so horrendous so quickly. Our reaction was to forget it.”^{vii}

The message of Easter, the central truth of our faith, is new life out of death. New life out of death. But new life cannot forget or discard death. Resurrection is *not* restoration. And the joy of Easter, the promise of Easter, is that resurrected life can be something *better*.

Who will we be as we come back together into church? And for that matter, as we go back into cinemas and restaurants and concert halls and stadiums? How will we be better? Will we honor our dead with greater compassion towards the living? Will our peculiarly American obsession with private medicine yield at last to a deeper concern for public health?^{viii} Can we carry with us into the years ahead a renewed understanding that our common life depends upon the toil of people who don’t earn enough to live securely?^{ix} Will the disproportionate suffering from this virus in communities of color shine a new light on inequity and lead us to repair what has always been broken, or left unspoken? *A pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night*.

Even now, the green blade is rising.^x Even now, in the dark and silence of the tomb, the molecules re-knit, the synapses rekindle.^{xi} And in the morning we will again hear the promise.

He goes ahead of us.

He promises to make us new.

“All you who stand near this marvelous and holy flame, pray with me to God the Almighty for the grace to sing the worthy praise of this great light.”

Amen.

ⁱ *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 286

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 290

ⁱⁱⁱ Mt. 28:7

^{iv} While it’s common for preachers to tsk-tsk Peter for “not getting it” in such episodes as the “Get behind me Satan” exchange with Jesus (Mk. 8:33), his wanting to build a booth atop Mount Tabor (Mk. 9:5) or, most notably, his Good Friday denials (Mk. 14:71), such a pulpit position lands, always to me, a bit priggishly. We *all* do the wrong thing in certain clutch moments. The point about Peter as the gospels arc into the Book of Acts is his stunning evolution. See his brave and eloquent Pentecost sermon in Jerusalem (Acts 2:14-36).

^v Jn. 20:21

^{vi} Jn. 21:1-14

^{vii} Crosby, Alfred W, *American’s Forgotten Pandemic: the Influenza of 1918* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition, 2003). Crosby was also interviewed for the PBS television series *American Experience: Influenza 1918* (Series 10, episode 5) which aired originally on February 9, 1998. His quotes here are from those interviews. PBS is currently streaming this remarkable episode for free from its website at <https://www.pbs.org/video/american-experience-influenza-1918/>

^{viii} Enright, Anne, dispatch from Dublin, Ireland in “Pandemic Journal,” *New York Review of Books*, April 23, 2020, p.6

^{ix} *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 134

^x Hymnal 1982, hymn 204

^{xi} I’ve borrowed here some of the imagery from John Updike’s poem, “Seven Stanzas at Easter,” written in 1960 while Updike was worshipping at a Lutheran church in Marblehead, Massachusetts. Updike’s church was sponsoring a religious arts festival and competition; this poem took first prize. Updike returned his winnings (\$100) to the congregation. You may find the entire poem here at <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/seven-stanzas-at-easter/>